Impact Evaluation of USAID's Community-Based Crime and Violence Prevention Approach in Central America:
Regional Report for El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Panama

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Executive Summary

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I. Background

The countries of Central America — especially "the Northern Triangle" of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras — are among the most criminally violent nations in the world. As part of the U.S. Government's (USG) Central America Regional Security Initiative (CARSI), the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) has designed and implemented a set of programs to improve citizen security in Central America by strengthening community capacity to combat crime and by creating educational and employment opportunities for at-risk youth.[1] USAID's crime prevention work has been implemented through its field Missions in five countries: El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Panama.

> USAID's crime prevention programs in Central America have been a success. The outcomes in the treatment communities improved more (or declined less) than they would have if USAID's programs had not been administered.

USAID/Washington, via its Cooperative Agreement with the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) at Vanderbilt University,[2] asked LAPOP to design and carry out an impact evaluation of the crime prevention interventions under CARSI in Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras[3], and Panama.

This evaluation is part of a broader effort to determine the effectiveness of community-based crime prevention, in contrast to the traditionally more common law enforcement, or *mano dura* ("iron fist"), approach to addressing the widespread crime and violence permeating Central America. The crime prevention approach attempts to address the root causes of crime, rather than deal with crime after it has become endemic.

This multi-method, multi-country, multi-year evaluation was designed to contribute to an understanding of the effectiveness of USAID's community-based crime and violence prevention approach. This package of interventions – that is, the "treatment" in this impact evaluation – includes activities such as planning by municipal-level committees; crime observatories and data collection; crime prevention through environmental design (such as improved street lighting, graffiti removal, cleaned up public spaces); programs for at-risk youth (such as outreach centers, workforce development, mentorships); and community policing. USAID's community-based crime prevention projects are inherently cross-sectoral. That is, they integrate education and workforce development, economic growth and employment, public health, and governance interventions.

This scientifically rigorous impact evaluation is based on recommendations found in the comprehensive study by the National Academy of Sciences (National Research Council 2008).[4] It presents a summary of the main findings for the region as a whole. For each of the four focus countries, a more extensive, detailed country-level report has been prepared and is available online at *http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/carsi-study.php*.

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1 See http://www.whitehouse.gov/ondcp/central-america, http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/148416.pdf.
2 AID-598-A-00-06-00061.
3 The program in Honduras was delayed because of political unrest there in 2009, and therefore in this regional report the Honduras study includes only two rounds, rather than the three rounds carried out in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Panama. Variations in the methodology employed in Honduras and Panama were necessary in order to be responsive to changing USAID requirements. The individual country reports explain those differences.
4 One of the authors of this report, Mitchell A. Seligson, was a member of the National Academy of Science committee that wrote the study cited above.
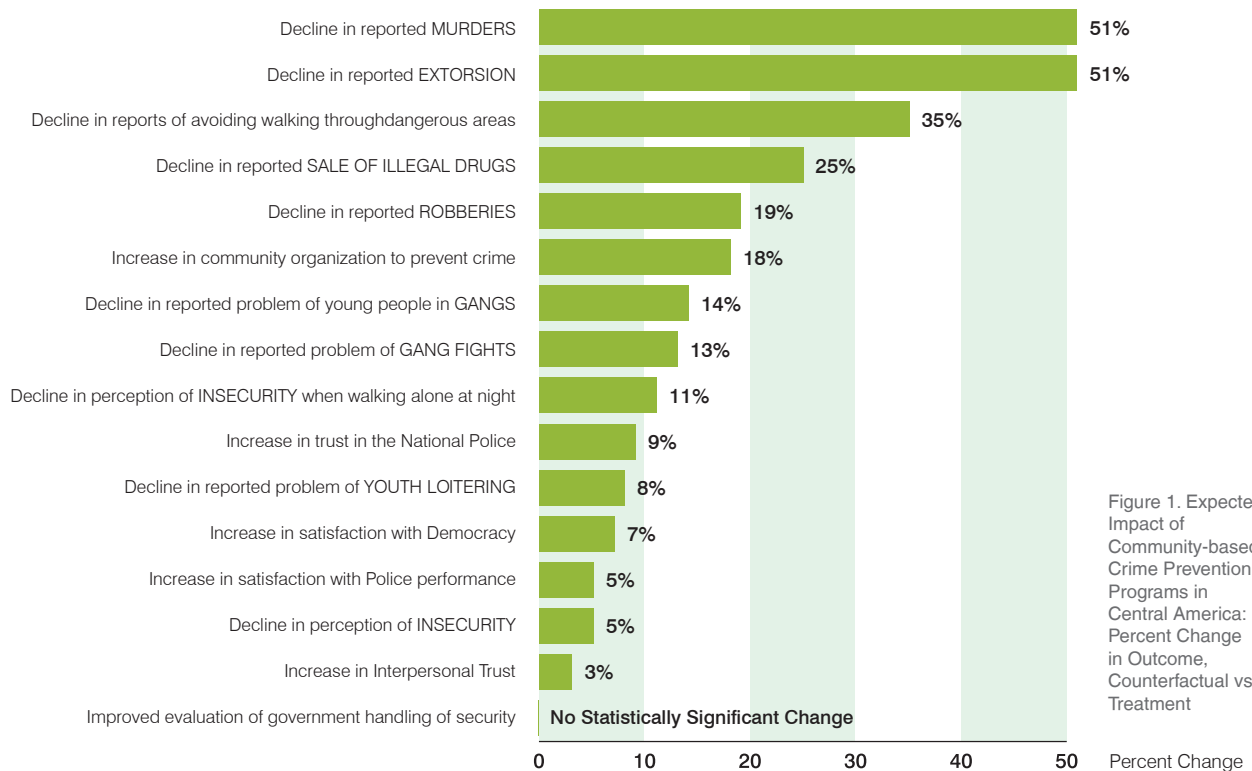
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II. Main Findings

The main finding, on average, of this multi-year impact evaluation of the community-based[5] interventions is that *in several key respects the programs have been a success. Specifically, the outcomes in the treatment communities improved more (or declined less) than they would have if USAID's programs had not been administered*. We base this conclusion on the direct evidence we have from the extensive survey data gathered from more than 29,000 respondents living in 127 treatment and control neighborhoods and by 848 qualitative stakeholder interviews and 44 focus groups.

LAPOP Impact Evaluations Sites

Quantitative Findings:

The overall quantitative findings are summarized in Figure 1 below. It lists the ways in which the evaluated programs had an impact, and percentage change in each measured outcome attributable to the programs on the treated communities across the four countries under study.

Decline in reported MURDERS	51%
Decline in reported EXTORSION	51%
Decline in reports of avoiding walking through dangerous areas	35%
Decline in reported SALE OF ILLEGAL DRUGS	25%
Decline in reported ROBBERIES	19%
Increase in community organization to prevent crime	18%
Decline in reported problem of young people in GANGS	14%
Decline in reported problem of GANG FIGHTS	13%
Decline in perception of INSECURITY when walking alone at night	11%
Increase in trust in the National Police	9%
Decline in reported problem of YOUTH LOITERING	8%
Increase in satisfaction with Democracy	7%
Increase in satisfaction with Police performance	5%
Decline in perception of INSECURITY	5%
Increase in Interpersonal Trust	3%
Improved evaluation of government handling of security	No Statistically Significant Change

Figure 1. Expected Impact of Community-based Crime Prevention Programs in Central America: Percent Change in Outcome, Counterfactual vs. Treatment

Percent Change

5 Throughout this report, the term "community" is used interchangeably with "neighborhood."

The list of findings below provides greater detail and explanation than is found in the chart. The results are organized into five major categories that were established at the outset of the research, in which we hypothesize being able to measure impact. *The results are based on extensive survey data gathered in the treatment and control communities via probability samples of voting-aged adults, and are not results based on police reports. Therefore, the "reports" referred to below are reports made to the survey interviewers rather than police reports.* We use this approach because underreporting of crime to the police is common worldwide, and LAPOP research has shown that in the particular study at hand, on average in Central America, reporting of crimes to the authorities is inversely related to the incidence of crime.

(1) The community-based crime prevention program under CARSI produces a significant reduction in the expected level of crime victimization and violence:

- Compared to what we would expect to see without USAID interventions, 19% fewer surveyed residents reported being aware of robberies in their neighborhoods
- Compared to what we would expect to see without USAID interventions, 25% fewer surveyed residents reported being aware of illegal drug sales in their neighborhoods
- Compared to what we would expect to see without USAID interventions, 51% fewer surveyed residents reported being aware of extortion and blackmail in their neighborhoods
- Compared to what we would expect to see without USAID interventions, 51% fewer surveyed residents reported being aware of murders in their neighborhoods

(2) The community-based crime prevention program under CARSI resulted in a significant increase in the expected level of citizens' sense of security:

- Compared to what we would expect to see without USAID interventions, perceptions of insecurity in the neighborhood were 5% lower
- Compared to what we would expect to see without USAID interventions, residents were 11% less likely to report feeling unsafe when walking alone at night through their neighborhoods

(3) The community-based crime prevention program under CARSI is responsible for a significant decrease in the expected level of neighborhood disorder, such as loitering and gang presence:

- Compared to what we would expect to see without USAID interventions, perception of youth loitering as a problem was 8% lower
- Compared to what we would expect to see without USAID interventions, residents' perceptions of youth in gangs as a problem were 14% lower
- Compared to what we would expect to see without USAID interventions, residents' perceptions of gang fights as a problem were 13% lower
- Compared to what we would expect to see without USAID interventions, 35% fewer residents report being likely to avoid dangerous areas of the neighborhood because of fear of crime
- Compared to what we would expect to see without USAID interventions, residents' evaluations of their communities' organization for crime prevention were 18% higher

(4) Satisfaction with police performance has increased significantly as a result of the community-based crime prevention program under CARSI:

- Compared to what we would expect to see without USAID interventions, residents' satisfaction with police performance was 5% higher
- Compared to what we would expect to see without USAID interventions, residents' trust in the police was 9% higher

(5) Indirect effects of the community-based crime prevention program under CARSI values include strengthening democratic values, which have increased significantly over the expected level in the absence of the program:

- Compared to what we would expect to see without USAID interventions, residents' levels of interpersonal trust were 3% greater
- Compared to what we would expect to see without USAID interventions, residents' satisfaction with the functioning of democracy was 7% higher

As noted, the qualitative interviews produced many complementary findings that help explain and deepen our understanding of the quantitative results and the community context in which the programs were implemented. The key ones are as follows:

Qualitative Findings:

(1) The Role of Schools

- Schools can play an important role in crime prevention. Some are creating better environments for at-risk youth with innovative *Convivencia Escolar* (School Harmony) programs, institutionalization of student leadership groups within schools, and the training of teachers and students in mediation and alternative conflict resolution.

- Some schools, particularly in El Salvador, have successfully reduced or eliminated home suspensions for unruly students, substituting in-school penalties and counseling. This helps ensure that students will not be left unsupervised at home, a condition that often leads to students turning to gangs for support and companionship.

- School expulsion policies affect both expelled students and students already enrolled in the schools to which the former are newly assigned. Expelled students may be assigned to distant schools, forcing them to live apart from their families. These expelled students may frighten students and parents at the receiving school, leading those students to leave the school, thus beginning a chain reaction of absenteeism and instability.

- Teachers and administrators are enthusiastic about the role of school-based, on-site psychologists in improving troubled students' behavior. As schools begin using less corporal punishment and more psychological counseling and mediation for conflict resolution, they are seeing positive results among troubled youths. Students divulge abuse and other problems to psychologists, opening the door to assistance.

- School directors and teachers play a vital role in uncovering child abuse and other domestic violence in the home, and they have been sensitive to frequent domestic violence situations that adversely affect their students' behavior. One repeatedly mentioned problem is teenage pregnancies, which often leads to female students dropping out of school. Some administrators said that they make allowances for students who have babies, doing whatever they can to enable these young girls to complete their high school education. In Guatemala, school directors' narratives reveal that incest appears to occur with alarming frequency, particularly in rural areas. Specifically, fathers have been found to be having sexual relations with their under-age daughters, thereby fathering their daughters' babies.

(2) Getting out of Gangs

- Police officers consistently reported that it was no longer possible for gang members to dissociate themselves from their gangs. In El Salvador for example, police officers reported that the only way out of a gang was in a coffin. Previously, gang members could leave the gangs by joining a church. Now, even if

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a former gang member becomes a pastor or matures into a middle-aged father with a regular job, he may be expected to perform services for the gang over the course of his life.

(3) The Role of Family

• There is near universal agreement in the stakeholder interviews that the major factor associated with youths dropping out of school and joining violent gangs is the "broken home" ("*la familia desintegrada*"). Children in single-parent households, ones typically headed by mothers, often lack supervision and thus are more at risk of joining gangs. The risk is especially high when the single-mother takes on a partner who is not the biological father of the children, a situation that frequently pushes the minor out of the house and into the arms of a gang.

• Gangs represent surrogate families for youths seeking friendship and protection.

(4) The Role of Churches

• Churches of all denominations play an especially important role in crime and violence prevention. Their youth group programs, some of them funded by USAID, are seen by stakeholders as preventing youths from hanging out on street corners by getting them engaged in socially positive activities (recreational, religious, and job training).

• Evangelical pastors were considered by our stakeholders to be especially active in reaching out to youths already in gangs, in an effort to extract them from active membership. They also often serve as mediators between warring gangs, in order to help prevent bloodshed. In addition to pastors, there are also "Christian police officers" (*policías cristianos*, also known as *capellanes*, or chaplains), who evangelize in the prisons with the hope of counselling gang members before they are released from prison.

• The Catholic Church was seen as being effective in reducing crime levels as it engaged in well-established, age-graded programs, beginning in early childhood and continuing into adulthood. Some of those who have actively participated in the various youth programs graduate to becoming community leaders as young adults.

(5) The Role of the Community

• Community development association leaders, often members of Municipal Crime Prevention Committees, play a key role in violence prevention efforts. They are willing to share intelligence with police officers, but only if they know and trust them. A dedicated police hotline can be very useful for getting the authorities to show up when a crime is either in progress or being planned, but only when the official answering the call was known to the association leaders.

• In Guatemala, many leaders of the local community development councils (COCODES) and municipal-level organizations (the municipal community development association, COMUDES, and the Municipal Crime Prevention), who are key players in violence prevention efforts, reported that they are working closely with the National Civil Police in various ways such as:

  - Acting as intermediaries
  - Reporting crimes-in-progress to the police
  - Serving as interpreters for police who do not speak or understand the particular indigenous language of the area
  - Working with local night patrol groups, to ensure that the suspects whom they rounded up are handed over to the police and not to angry mobs
  - Reporting domestic violence

- At-risk youth reported that vocational training was the most valuable of the various outreach activities, believing it to be the path to a good job and a self-sufficient future. They found computer literacy courses especially valuable, and some said that they would have liked more advanced courses than the ones that were given, and smaller class sizes. Many others expressed appreciation for the music and art programs of those centers, as well as the athletic outlets that they provide.

- The Municipal Crime Prevention Committees comprise an innovative structure, one that is supported by USAID. Their success comes from their ability to galvanize the various stake-holding sectors of the targeted municipalities (specifically, the police, the school directors, the clergy, the community development association leaders, and health service providers) by incorporating representatives of each sector on every committee. These representatives become the link between the municipality and the various communities that have been selected for the crime prevention treatment, by reporting the Committees' plans to community stakeholders. Indeed, the CARSI interventions, or treatments, were themselves selected through input from the communities, by means of focus groups held with community leaders.

- A number of community association and municipal crime and violence prevention committee members in Guatemala and El Salvador reported that their efforts were hampered by political divisions between the municipal government and themselves. Specifically, whenever the mayor of the municipality was of a political party different from that of the majority of the committee members, support for the violence prevention programs would diminish, committee members told us. Municipal support for the crime/violence prevention programs had become politicized in some of the municipalities.

III. Policy Recommendations

The policy recommendations emerge from both the quantitative results (i.e., where the CARSI program has shown a significant impact), but are formulated drawing on the qualitative findings from the stakeholder interviews, paying special attention to the suggestions made by stakeholders. They are organized below into seven clusters of recommendations:

- **Make community-based crime and violence prevention programs a frontline weapon to improve citizen security, ideally prioritized over *mano dura* approaches**

    - The USAID approach to crime prevention under CARSI has been shown by the Vanderbilt LAPOP impact evaluation reported on here to reduce violence, crime, and fear of crime across communities at-risk in four countries in Central America and therefore seems to be an ideal way forward to make progress in the difficult task of reducing crime and violence in that region.
    - Public response to crime and violence prevention approaches should be widely accepted in the region as they have already garnered public support, as LAPOP's AmericasBarometer surveys have shown.

- **Improve community organization to address crime and violence**

    - Improve coordination between the municipal governments and their crime prevention committees and neighborhood-based actors.
    - Provide additional support to local, community-based crime prevention committees.
    - In municipalities where it is not already the case, the Municipal Crime Prevention Committee should have the representation and subcommittee participation of all at-risk communities in the municipality.

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- **Increase family support to reduce risk factors**

  - Expand pre-school, after-school, weekend and summer vacation child care (day care facilities subsidized by government and/or NGO funds) for children living in single-parent households.
  - Make child care programs available at little or only symbolic cost to poor families for pre-school children.
  - Make after-school programs (like the type being offered through USAID-sponsored outreach centers) available to school-aged children.

- **Use schools to address risk factors associated with youths' involvement with crime and violence**

  - Evaluate the sexual/domestic abuse component of both the curriculum and the police talks at the schools.
  - Ensure that these components include information about the existing laws that are designed to protect children from violence in the home.
  - Educate school directors about the steps they can take to report child abuse to the appropriate authorities. Train these directors on how to compassionately handle victims and coordinate interventions with teachers and psychologists.
  - Expand the presence of school psychologists to monitor students for domestic or emotional problems, to provide counseling, and to mediate conflicts.
  - Expand opportunities for students to have leadership opportunities through school clubs and activities and to be trained in or conduct conflict mediation.

- **Increase security at school**

  - Encourage the Ministries of Education to make a greater investment in the "School Harmony" program as well as similar programs that reduce school violence.
  - Direct more resources to school security especially in the form of police protection.
  - Implement a "safe backpack" program (a routine checking of backpacks for weapons and narcotics) in high-crime schools.

- **Actively partner with religious organizations and support church-affiliated youth programs**

  - More funds (governmental and non-governmental) need to be invested in church youth programs. These programs appear to be successful in drawing youths away from crime-oriented peer groups, and in some instances they offer one of the few alternatives to gangs.
  - Consideration should be given to determining exactly how successful the clergy have actually been in rescuing people from gangs. If the claims made in the interviews conducted for this study are supported, then greater involvement of the clergy in at-risk communities should be encouraged.

- **Improve police response and assignment patterns**

  - Train police officers to be responsive not only to community leaders' reports of criminal activity (as is the case in some parts of Guatemala), but also to calls for help from ordinary citizens.
  - Community leaders should be given the phone numbers and web addresses of dedicated police hotlines to facilitate their access to the police. For leaders who do not trust such phone numbers, efforts should be made by the police to make the cell phone numbers of particular officers who are trusted by specific leaders available to them.
  - Ensure that police officers get long-term assignments to communities so that they can develop trusting relationships with residents, increasing the chance that crime will be reported.
  - In the case of Guatemala, greater efforts should be made to recruit bilingual men and women into the National Civil Police force, matching the indigenous language background of the officers with the native language spoken in given police precincts.

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This study is the first, detailed, evidence-based evaluation of USAID's neighborhood-based approach to crime and violence prevention in Central America. The conclusions drawn in this report are based on more than 29,000 survey interviews and more than 800 qualitative interviews, across 4 countries, over multiple years. The research design used to conduct this evaluation was a mixture of qualitative and quantitative methods. This regional report utilizes the "difference-in-difference" statistical design which allowed us to conclude that the USAID approach improved critical crime/violence-related aspects of the neighborhoods more than would have been expected in the absence of the USAID intervention. These results clearly show that there is an alternative to the current "arms race" between law enforcement and gangs in Central America, and that is preventing crime and violence at the neighborhood level.

The Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) is a leader in the development, implementation, and analysis of data on individual opinions and behavior. As a center for excellence in survey research, LAPOP uses "gold standard" approaches and innovative methods to carry out targeted and national surveys; conduct impact evaluation studies; and produce reports on individual attitudes, evaluations, and experiences. Through years of polling and expanding a set of countries using sophisticated techniques, LAPOP has developed a treasure- trove of high quality data on citizens' views and behaviors across the Americas. As a pioneer in cutting-edge methods, LAPOP is a resource for all those interested in public opinion data of the highest quality.